



Department of Public Health

Monroe County, New York

Maggie Brooks
County Executive

Andrew S. Doniger, M.D., M.P.H.
Director

December 7, 2004

Dear Superintendent:

Every winter, we are faced with the challenges associated with protecting our children against cold weather. As the research on this subject has changed over time, I have provided you with information to assist in this decision.

The National Weather Service (NWS) issues warnings via the media when wind chills of -25°F are predicted (see attached chart). The NWS, however, does not make any recommendations as to when schools should close based upon temperature or wind chill. The New York State Education Department does not issue such guidance. Health Departments have no legal authority on when to close schools due to weather conditions.

Temperatures can vary widely within Monroe County and therefore among school districts. For instance, wind chill temperatures along the lakeshore can be very different than in downtown Rochester. So the question remains: "how cold is too cold to have school?" Unfortunately, there is not a simple answer to this question. As noted in the chart, **frostbite can occur on 'exposed' skin in about 30 minutes at wind chills of -25°F . At wind chills of -40°F , frostbite can affect 'exposed' skin in as little as 10 minutes.**

Local meteorologists typically forecast a range of temperatures. They will often use language such as "we are expecting wind chill temperatures of -25°F to -35°F in the morning." As noted above, temperatures in this range can become dangerous depending on how children are dressed, whether students have to walk to school, if they have long waits for the bus, etc. **After discussing this with the NWS, wind chills of -25°F to -40°F seem to be the right 'range' of temperatures to consider closing schools.** I believe it is impractical to pick an exact temperature to suggest to you as the absolute "closure" point. Wind chill temperatures anywhere in this range coupled with other factors unique to your school district can be dangerous. One can't say, for instance, that -24°F is safe, and -25°F is unsafe.

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We receive many calls each winter on this subject. We have posted a link to the NWS on the Monroe County Web site so you can easily share this information with others in your district. Visit us at: www.MonroeCounty.gov. Click on Public Health (then on 'Alerts for Public').

Closing school based upon weather is never an easy decision. I believe you have always used good judgement and I am confident that you will continue to do so.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "AS Doniger", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Andrew S. Doniger, MD, MPH
Director of Health